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Citizens in arms

The defence of Israel

By Edward N. Luttwak



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IN THIS REVIEW

AN ARMY LIKE NO OTHER

How the Israel Defence Forces made a nation

448pp. Verso. £20.

Haim Bresheeth-Zabner

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On page 3 of this book the author is a second lieutenant on the staff of the Golani infantry brigade during the Six Day War in June 1967, when two of the brigade's battalions, appropriately enough, were fighting their way up the steep Golan Heights to conquer the strongholds from which fire had been directed against Israeli farmers in the Hula valley below for almost two decades. He tells us: "I did not partake personally in the horrific battle".

One wonders what adjective he would have used to characterize other twentieth-century battles. To overcome the minefields, entrenchments, emplaced tank turrets and concrete firing bunkers of Tel Faher, Burj Babil, Tel Hamra, Ayn Fit, Tel Azaziat and Khirbet as-Suda (not Maginot Line fortresses, but formidable enough for infantrymen armed only with hand weapons), the Golani lost a grand total of fifty-nine soldiers, with a further 160 wounded: tragedies every single one of them but miraculously small numbers given what they faced. (The number of Syrians killed in action was also fairly modest - 2,500 across the entire front - because of a swift retreat.) But much, it seems, was horrific for Haim Bresheeth-Zabner, he apparently being a very great rarity among Israeli eighteen-year-olds at the time, having been "disinclined to join the IDF".

De gustibus non disputandum est, but he then adds a story about the immediate

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but for a shan (you idiot), then tells us that, after a while, the penny

dropped”. The only possible implication is that the prisoners were killed in cold blood, that is after the fighting ended, when the firing would have been heard loud and clear, triggering alarms, and prompting immediate questions.

Israeli military actions - past, present and non-existent - receive, I would wager, more scrutiny than those of any other army, and in the endless list of accusations against it - valid, semi-valid, improbable, or utterly impossible - no such prisoner massacre has ever previously been included. But I will offer no such probabilistic argument because I was there in the Hula Valley in June 1967, starting off in the defence militia on the border (with a bolt-action Mauser rifle) until the fighting ended, to then join the few unmobilized kibbutzniks in visiting the hitherto forbidden Heights. We were all so eager to see up close the menacing fortifications that had loomed above that we were undeterred by the rusty wire fences that unreliably marked the minefields - I still have a Syrian helmet I picked up outside a bunker. Then I found a ride towards Kuneitra (not yet fully cleared at that point), seeing clusters of Syrian prisoners here and there who would soon be handed back, without accusations of killings, then or later.

Every author is entitled to their opinions but not to their facts, and *An Army Like No Other* is replete with facts absent from the public record, not because of carelessness, methinks, but because the author is not content to condemn Israel as the worst country in the world and its army as the SS *redivivus*. Instead he insists on being original. Thus on page 4 he writes that “the battle fought by [the] Golani had no real military objective: the [Syrian] men who had died like rats in a barrel had not represented a threat: their positions were isolated, their retreat was blocked”. He then quotes anonymous as telling him that the Golani had to

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victorious, the UN Security Council was suddenly hyperactive, imposing ceasefires on the Egyptian and Jordanian fronts on June 8, 1967 - the third day of the war - and at 3am on June 9, Syria also announced its acceptance of a ceasefire. Syrian artillery had been firing into Israel for years, and much more intensively since June 5 (as I experienced for myself - not Passchendaele, admittedly, but no picnic either). With a ceasefire, the until-then-unattacked Syrians would be able to exit the war with their artillery positions on the Golan escarpment intact, free to resume firing after matters calmed down in a month, or a year. And so, as the forces withdrawn from the two other fronts began to arrive, the Israelis attacked from 7am on June 9 with maximum, frantic urgency, because it could not be known how many hours would be allowed before the Security Council would impose that ceasefire to stop the attack midstride. (Israel, at this stage, it should be remembered, had lost support from France and was faced with the habitually unfriendly UK, the totally hostile Soviet Union and an ambivalent US, which was not yet the ally it would become.) The Golani assault up the escarpment therefore did have a “real military objective”, and one of the outmost strategic urgency: to secure the ridge line before the inevitable ceasefire. For the same reason, there was no logical room left for the mock-Homeric bit attributed to anonymous. Either anonymous was a total idiot who had no idea that Israeli military ventures were apt to be interrupted by the Great Powers, even though it had just happened on two fronts, or else the author made up the story.

Bresheeth-Zabner is one of those Israelis who are warmly welcomed in London by the academics and publicists who, for reasons on which we need not speculate here, studiously overlook every other conflict in the world (including Syria's, amazingly enough with its own Palestinian casualties numbering in the many

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with the Israeli army of course.

That is a bargain that Bresheeth-Zabner is very willing to fulfil. We thus read: “The Israelis are the greatest warmongers in the Middle East” - even though he must be aware that their Middle Eastern competitors in warmongering, from the Syrians to the Iraqis to the Iranians, have managed to kill many times more people, and continue, in some instances, to do so. Moreover, he insists on intellectualizing his consuming hatred, doing so with unintended comical effect when quoting Dalia Gavrieli-Nuri, who must be very famous because she is otherwise unmentioned, and who is presumably another member of the Israel-hating Israeli subtribe, whose innovation is the concept of WND, Israel’s “war-normalizing discourse”. I have lived in ignorance of WND until now, but I do wonder how much “normalization” is needed when war is a daily reality (a daily dose of rockets and fire balloons from Gaza persisted in recent months, Covid-19 and all, until the July ceasefire), and there remain voices calling for a war of extermination against Israel - very official voices in Iran’s case - which, let us not forget, is actually a unique locution in contemporary war-mongering discourse (WMD?), not even heard from the likes of Kim Jong-un.

Sometimes this author’s urge to blacken everything Israeli leads him to put both feet in it, deeply. One example that I will long cherish occurs when he writes that David Ben-Gurion’s model in establishing the Israeli army in 1948 was “the Prussian *Das Volk in Waffen*” - with all the implications of “Waffen you-know-what” that we are meant to make - which he further defines as “a centralized, authoritarian, ideological, and professional body - an instrument of occupation, expulsion and subjugation”. Well, he is totally right about the Prussian part, because the phrase was coined by the uber-Prussian Field Marshal Leopold

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army that emerged to resist the Germans after the defeat of Napoleon III's professional army in 1870, volunteers all, raised by the radical Léon Gambetta, whose spirit would persist in the Paris Commune sacred to every *gauchiste* ever since - and not the Waffen SS therefore.

As for the assertion that the IDF was created *ab initio* as an instrument of "occupation, expulsion and subjugation", it might pass with some, but for the date: on May 15, 1948, the matters at hand were not exactly glorious conquest and cruel occupation but rather survival - that day, that night and on the morrow - because the Egyptian army, the British-officered Arab Legion, the Syrian army and sundry other militias were at that stage converging to fulfil the Arab League's promise of a swift bloodbath. True, these armies were poorly trained and poorly led, but they were armies nonetheless, and they did have armoured vehicles, machine guns, artillery, radios and other useful accoutrements, whereas Ben-Gurion's *Volk in Waffen* was pathetically short on *waffen*, owing to very strict British policing until the day before independence, which made even a single rifle valuable, and a single machine gun precious, followed by a very strict arms embargo thereafter, jointly imposed by the British Empire and the US (people went to prison for smuggling a few pistols to the Jews). As a result, and in the total absence of anti-tank weaponry, even the Arab Legion's 4×4 armoured cars (the lowest form of life among armoured fighting vehicles) were an unstoppable threat, while the Egyptian army's twenty-five pounders could smash the frontier kibbutzim unimpeded. The British intent to strangle the unwanted state at birth, which the US Department of State fully shared, was only thwarted by the willingness of both pro-Zionist and profiteering Czechs to sell Israel weapons - a deal in which Stalin concurred - that boon being severely limited by the need to fly in everything with an assortment of battered aircraft. What arrived was

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In that war, as in most wars, there was a winner and loser, but the Palestinian losers did not move on, hence the existence of nth generation “refugees”, forever deluded by false *reconquista* promises to hold on to a worthless prior residence claim denied to all other defeated nations in territorial conflicts in the years of their own defeat. But our author does not like the Palestinians enough to tell them the truth, thereby insisting on Palestinian exceptionalism, and there is no point in arguing with anyone’s exceptionalist illogic.

Still, that affords no licence for wild exaggerations, such as that the Palestinians in Israel (ie Israeli Arabs) have “few or no rights of any kind”. If this is the case, how is it, we might ask, that Israeli Arabs go to law like anyone else for matters large and small, in courts in which there are many Arab lawyers, and also Arab judges who rule on Arab cases, Jewish cases and any other cases according to the rule of law, regardless of identities? Nor can it be disputed that Israel’s Arab citizens are free to vote for parliamentary candidates of their own choice, who can actually represent them - a great rarity in the Arab world. And the author’s apparent need to blacken Israel affords him no licence for the countless factual errors - most of them easily avoidable via a little light googling. For example, the threatening 1967 overflight of the Dimona nuclear reactor by a pair of formidable Soviet MiG-25s - introduced by Bresheeth-Zabner to build up an extremely convoluted argument whereby Israel was really to blame for Nasser’s war-provoking decision to demand the withdrawal of UN troops in May 1967 - has that very fine Mach 3 machine flying as a potential bomber three years before it first became operational as an ultra-fast fighter with no bombing capability at all. Later on, the author again casts the Soviet leaders as mad bombers to demonstrate how, during the Yom Kippur War of October 1973, Israel actually

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in response to [an Israeli air strike on the Aswan dam] the [Soviet] air force would have to land a nuclear blow on Israel” - thereby combining two impossibilities in one paragraph, derived from the miraculous source “in the highest corridors of power”. First, the Soviet Union’s attempt to remain a player during the 1973 war diplomacy was a million miles removed from a nuclear war decision. (It was

Henry Kissinger who theatrically elevated the nuclear alert level to get the Soviets’ attention.) As for the Israeli airforce, it was not run by imbeciles who would waste good bombs on the Aswan High Dam, which is not a concrete wall that might be breached even by plain dive-bombing but a huge earthen embankment dam with a width of one kilometre, which could only be breached by many bombing runs with bomb loads impossible for Israel at that time.

The author declares himself particularly indebted to Tariq Ali for the parturition of this book. I know Ali slightly and do not doubt his ill will for Israel, but neither do I think him a fool, so I must presume that in his busy life he just did not have the time to read this book. Better luck next time, though Israel’s *Volk in Waffen*, or, if one prefers, *les enfants de la Patrie*, will not be slumbering until then.

Edward N. Luttwak is a rancher and government contractor. He is the author of The Rise of China vs. the Logic of Strategy, 2012, Coup d’Etat: A practical handbook, revised edition 2016, and works on grand strategy

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